

# CHAPTER 3

## USING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY TO IMPROVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

### VIGNETTE: CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY IN ACTION

Ms. Ou's racially and economically diverse class is engaged in a stimulating conversation about cultural stereotypes. Some would say sixth graders are not capable of such insightful and thoughtful comments, but the students themselves are heatedly debating. Ms. Ou skillfully moderates a student-centered discussion, continuously asking students to bring their ideas back to the texts. Initially, they compare the tone and mood in Amy Tan's short story "Fish Cheeks" and Wing Tek Lum's poem "T-Bone Steak for Ben Tong," but the conversation slowly evolves to a discussion of cultural beliefs and practices.

Ms. Ou shares her personal story of being Chinese American, comparing herself to the characters in the story. She says to the class, as they listen raptly, "When I went back to China, I felt more like a tourist. On the outside, I blended in, but on the inside, I felt more American. I experienced a role reversal." She then asks the students if they ever feel "one way on the inside, though you look differently on the outside." The students discuss their emerging teenager identities, and students from other cultures, such as French and Chinese, share examples of cultural habits that sometimes make them question their own identities. When one student makes a joke about another's cultural practice, Ms. Ou is quick to remind him of the classroom rules of respect and tolerance: "You can't judge someone because their worldview or their culture is different than yours or the way you grew up. Let's look back to the texts to see if we can learn any lessons from these authors."

**FOCUS QUESTIONS**

- How does culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) improve teaching and learning in urban schools?
- What are the primary components of CRP?
- Why is it important to address, respect, and incorporate students' cultures into classroom practice?
- What effective teaching practices are associated with CRP?

**T**he seamless connection between the way that Ms. Ou discusses curriculum and culture with her students makes this type of teaching seem effortless, but behind the scenes Ms. Ou reflects and plans continually to ensure that her lessons are rigorous, individualized, and relevant to the students' lives inside and outside the classroom. In today's society, which emphasizes student consumption of media and teacher consumption of test scores, it is especially important that all teachers find ways to make students feel valued in the classroom, emphasizing that their identity is more than what society tells them they are and how school districts label them. As discussed in the previous chapter, maintaining a positive learning environment in which students are respected, challenged, and committed improves not only teaching, but also learning, which is educators' primary goal.

One of the most significant and effective ways to nurture this positive learning environment is by establishing a pedagogy of cultural responsiveness in one's classroom. In the next section, we describe what it means to be culturally responsive by first defining culture and then sharing the key theoretical tenets of this approach to teaching.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY**

### ***Race, Ethnicity, and Culture: What's the Difference?***

A key component to the theory of **culturally responsive pedagogy** (CRP) is the very specific definition of culture used by noted scholars in various fields, including education, sociology, history, cultural studies, and others. What is notable about this definition is its distinction from other ideas such as race and ethnicity. While all of the terms are interrelated, it is important to distinguish between their unique attributes to understand how to incorporate culture into one's classroom.

**Race** is a socially constructed category, not biologically based on physical appearance and attributes, as some believe. The idea of race as a social construction is explained well by Waters (2002):

These categories vary across time and place . . . [and] reflect shared social meanings in society [and] differences in power relations. . . . Rather than being an immutable fixed characteristic, [social categories like race] are subject to a great deal of flux and change—both intergenerationally, over the life course, and situationally. (p. 25)

Racially, one might be Caucasian/White, Black, Hispanic/Latino/Chicano, Native American, or Asian/Indian, for example, depending on the time and place. Thus, while a Southeast Indian student might be racially constructed as Asian in the United States, he would be racially constructed as Black in Britain (Hall, 2002). **Ethnicity**, on the other hand, is a particular group to which one belongs, as determined by an acceptance of cultural mores, origins, and customs. Ethnicity is about a group's tradition. For example, one may be racially White, but ethnically Irish or Italian. Others may be racially Black, but ethnically African American, Kenyan, or Caribbean.

**Culture** is often described as a group's way of being in the world. Cultural perspectives and identities shape individuals' worldviews, values, and preferences. For example, mainstream White American culture might be described as valuing individualism and competition. There are many intersecting identities that make up one's culture, including language, religion, and sexuality. It is especially important for teachers to recognize students who may fit into one or more racial, ethnic, or cultural categories and may consider themselves bi- or multiracial, multiethnic, or multicultural. These students may identify with one group more than the others, or they may choose to identify with traditions and traits of both groups. Currently, No Child Left Behind requires school to report scores by racial subgroup, while the U.S. Census asks citizens to report their ethnic origins; thus, sometimes these categories, if used appropriately, can also help to examine discrimination patterns in society.

### ***"I Don't See Race": Eschewing a Colorblind Approach to Teaching***

For many novice teachers, especially White teachers, thinking about race and culture is a new experience, something that they may never have confronted before. Howard (1999) calls this the *luxury of ignorance*, building on McIntosh's (1992) notion that Whites have the **privilege** of going through their



Students bring many intersecting cultural identities to the classroom, including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexuality, and ability.

lives without needing to defend or prove themselves because of their race. McIntosh sees these privileges as an “invisible knapsack” that Whites carry with them wherever they go, enabling them to peruse a store without being followed, to succeed in life without being seen as a “credit to their race,” or even to find a Band-Aid the color of their skin. White teachers may see the acknowledgment of racial and cultural differences as counterproductive, and they often assert what has come to be known as a **colorblind** approach to teaching. For example, we have heard teachers say, “It doesn’t matter if my students are White, Black, purple, or green. I treat all students the same way,” and “I don’t see race. I see individual students, not their skin color.”

Colorblindness has become especially popular since the election of President Barack Obama, when supporters and critics alike claimed that his election proved we are in a “post-racial” society. Some scholars, however, disagree that post-raciality is a goal for the common good and see colorblindness as “the new racism” (Bonilla-Silva, 2010, p. 213). Bonilla-Silva argues, “A black man ‘in charge’ gives the impression of monumental change and allows whites to tell those who research, write, talk and organize against racial inequality that they must be crazy. Whites can now say ‘How can racism be important in a

country that just elected a black man as its president?’ and add ‘By the way, I voted for Obama, so I cannot be a racist’” (p. 233). Refusing to acknowledge that racism still exists is similar to the discursive practices that are used to discuss race in a world where discussing race is seen as taboo or incendiary. For example, people may couch racial views discursively by beginning, “I am not prejudiced, but . . .” or “Some of my best friends are Black, so . . .” or “I’m not Black so I don’t know, but. . . .” We frequently hear preservice teachers, especially White preservice teachers, begin discussions on race and culture with the caveat, “I don’t want to offend anyone, but. . . .”

White teachers’ desire or ability to not see race, though, is an example of their cultural privilege. Because they have never been forced to see themselves as racial beings, unlike their black and brown students, they may not understand how central one’s race is to one’s identity. Thus, colorblindness is a counterproductive technique. By refusing to acknowledge vital components of their students’ backgrounds, teachers who assert colorblind ideologies either ignore or undervalue the children they teach. Bonilla-Silva (2010) believes that this colorblindness is even more dangerous for society writ large:

The “new racism” reproduces racial domination mostly through subtle and covert discriminatory practices which are often institutionalized, defended with coded language, . . . and bonded by the racial ideology of color-blind racism. . . . Compared to Jim Crow, this new system seems genteel but it is extremely effective in preserving systemic advantages for whites and keeping people of color at bay. The new regime is, in the immortal words of Roberta Flack’s song, of the “killing me softly” variety. (p. 213)

Cochran-Smith (2004) sees moving *beyond* colorblindness as one of the central ways to combat and erase dysfunctional schooling patterns for children of color.

Colorblindness can have serious, long-term effects on student learning and success. For example, teachers who do not recognize their students’ backgrounds may also consciously or unconsciously hold a deficit perspective of their abilities (Irvine, 2003; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). Such a perspective undermines quality education because it allows teachers to blame outside factors for students’ failure; instead of taking responsibility for their teaching and instead of acknowledging an unequal structure of power, teachers instead blame parents, “rough” neighborhoods, or a culture that doesn’t value education, for example. As a result, they may lower their expectations for and stereotype their students of color. (See Chapter 1 for further discussion of the deficit perspective.)

### ***From Colorblind to Culturally Responsive***

Once teachers are able to recognize that race, ethnicity, and culture are salient parts of their students' identities that deserve to be respected and represented in classroom discourse, they can move from colorblindness to **cultural responsiveness**. Scholars have referred to this skill—the ability to teach in a way that validates their students' cultural, racial, and ethnic identities—by many different names, including “culturally relevant, sensitive, [student] centered, congruent, reflective, mediated, contextualized, synchronized, and responsive” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). But common among all research is the notion that students' cultures need to be validated in both *what* they are taught and *how* they are taught, combined with a wider transformative purpose to empower students. Culturally responsive teaching is evident in the way teachers see themselves and others, the way teachers structure their social interactions, and the way teachers view knowledge in their classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 1997, p. 28).

Though these theories have been traditionally used to describe the process needed for White teachers to work with Black children, the same theory can be applied to *any* teacher who needs to be prepared to instruct students of various races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Whether racial, ethnic, or cultural, any gap between students and teachers can result in a misunderstanding of student behavior, academic ability, and teacher expectations (Irvine, 1991). It is important to remember that simply because a teacher is the same race or culture as her students does not mean she is automatically culturally responsive (Nieto, 2003).

According to Ladson-Billings (1997), one of the foremost scholars in multicultural education, the aim of culturally relevant or responsive pedagogy is to “empower students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 20). She contrasts this type of teaching, which allows students to identify with both academic excellence and their home culture, with **assimilationist** teaching styles, whereby teachers do not consider students' culture or personal characteristics. Assimilationist teachers are concerned with ensuring that students “fit into society” and thus “homogenize students into one ‘American’ identity” (p. 38). Context needs to be taken into consideration for cultural responsiveness to be effective. If teachers are able to recognize that they are “some person teaching something to some student somewhere” (Irvine, 2003, p. 48), they will be able to view their teaching with a “cultural eye,” thus combating the assimilationist perspective that standardizes students and curricula.



This sample lesson asks students to consider their culture's definition of beauty alongside the media's image of beauty, drawing on students' cultural knowledge.

Source: Alyssa Hadley Dunn.

Teachers who are culturally responsive also want students to “fit” into society and recognize that they must provide them with the skills necessary to succeed in dominant society, but they have higher expectations and maintain intellectual rigor in their classrooms (Delpit, 1995; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1997). As Siddle Walker (1996) has shown, African American teachers historically held high expectations for students of color, and these expectations enabled students to reach “their highest potential,” the title of her historical text. Thus, if students of color could succeed with high expectations in the segregated South, there is no reason to lower expectations for them in contemporary society. Intellectual rigor is achieved by carefully “scaffold[ing] instruction and build[ing] bridges between the cultural experiences . . . and the curriculum content . . . to facilitate higher levels of learning” and by using a variety of teaching strategies that encourage dialogue and critical thinking (Gay, 2000, p. 44).

Additionally, CRP makes explicit issues of power and privilege. Teachers who are culturally responsive challenge their own privilege and combat the **myth of meritocracy**, whereby everyone can succeed equally if they desire it enough (McIntosh, 1992). They challenge the “up by the bootstraps” mentality and are willing to discuss these controversies with their students. (See Chapter 1 for more on the myth of meritocracy.) Table 3.1 contrasts what CRP *is* and what it is *not*, providing a summary of characteristics from noted theorists Gay (2000), Irvine and Armento (2001), and Ladson-Billings (1997). Also included is an example of each culturally responsive pedagogical practice in a classroom setting. While there are many more characteristics of culturally responsive teachers, which can be found in the books presented in this chapter’s References and Suggested Resources sections, we have chosen only several to highlight here because of their preponderance across theories.

**Table 3.1** Characteristics and Examples of CRP

What CRP IS	What CRP IS NOT
<p>Having high expectations for students of all backgrounds to achieve their highest potential <i>For example:</i> A teacher of English language learners (ELLs) believes that her first-generation immigrant students are capable of attending college if they desire.</p>	<p>Lowering expectations because of a belief that students of some backgrounds are not capable of high achievement <i>For example:</i> An ELL teacher creates lessons that help prepare her first-generation immigrant students for menial labor positions because she does not think them capable of attending college.</p>
<p>Using high-level teaching strategies and encouraging intellectual rigor <i>For example:</i> A language arts teacher uses similar teaching strategies, like a Socratic seminar or literature circles, for her gifted class and her general level class.</p>	<p>Using low-level teaching strategies and teaching only basic skills <i>For example:</i> A language arts teacher uses project-based learning for her gifted class but uses only test-prep and rote memorization lessons with her general level class.</p>
<p>Making explicit issues of power and privilege <i>For example:</i> A social studies teacher discusses residential segregation and gentrification with her history class and provides the historical context for such inequality.</p>	<p>Pretending that issues of power and privilege do not exist or are too uncomfortable to discuss <i>For example:</i> When discussing the history of their city, a social studies teacher ignores the history of residential segregation or racism.</p>

(Continued)



**Table 3.1** (Continued)

What CRP IS	What CRP IS NOT
<p>Incorporating students' cultures into the curriculum</p> <p><i>For example:</i> A math teacher discusses the evolution of mathematics from Egypt and Babylon, instead of focusing only on Greek math systems.</p>	<p>Teaching curricular content that does not relate to or respect students' funds of knowledge</p> <p><i>For example:</i> A math teacher uses a classic example of a standardized test question about the speed of a boat in a regatta. For urban students who may have no cultural knowledge of sailing, this example is not relevant or responsive.</p>
<p>Providing opportunities for students to engage, cooperate, and collaborate with each other</p> <p><i>For example:</i> A science teacher allows groups of students to develop their own experiment and demonstrate the process and results to the class.</p>	<p>Focusing on teacher-centered instruction that replicates the <i>banking model</i> of education (Freire, 2006)</p> <p><i>For example:</i> During a science class, the teacher puts a cell diagram on the board and lectures about each part's function, then requires students to memorize the information for a multiple-choice exam.</p>
<p>Demonstrating that all cultures have value</p> <p><i>For example:</i> An elementary teacher discusses the conflict between Israel and Palestine during a current events unit, presenting both sides of the story and challenging students to form their own opinions.</p>	<p>Valuing some cultural beliefs or practices above others</p> <p><i>For example:</i> During a lesson on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, an elementary teacher presents only the portion of the story with which she agrees.</p>
<p>Sustaining a commitment to multicultural education throughout the year and throughout curricula</p> <p><i>For example:</i> A Spanish teacher discusses the political movements behind and social implications of Cinco de Mayo, instead of having only a food-centered celebration.</p>	<p>Celebrating only "heroes and holidays" or discussing only "food and festivals," thus encouraging a cursory approach to multicultural education</p> <p><i>For example:</i> A Spanish teacher asks students to bring in tacos and piñatas to celebrate Cinco de Mayo, without discussing any historical or cultural facts.</p>

### ***The Importance of Multicultural Education***

A major component of CRP is **multicultural education**. When students and teachers typically hear the term, they think about "add on" lessons or cultural celebrations or months. However, we believe that Nieto's (2003) definition of multicultural education is both comprehensive and significant:

Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates the schools' curriculum and instructional strategies, as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families, and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection, and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes democratic principles of social justice. (p. 305)

Several components of this definition will be discussed in future chapters (reflection and action in Chapter 7 on inquiry, social change in Chapter 8 on social justice). Here, we concentrate on the notion that multicultural education should permeate a school's culture and curriculum, no matter what type of school. Multicultural education, in contrast to **monocultural education**, is indeed important for students from all backgrounds: "Because it is *about* all people, it is also *for* all people" (Nieto, 2003, p. 311). And, as Nieto writes, "it can even be convincingly argued that students from the dominant culture need multicultural education more than others because they are generally the most miseducated about diversity" (p. 311).

One of the ways that you and your fellow educators can evaluate the type and effectiveness of multicultural education used in your school and classroom is by examining Banks's (2004) theory of approaches to multicultural education. Banks lists four approaches in ascending order of effectiveness. The first is the **Contributions Approach**, in which already-planned lessons include minimal discussion of multicultural figures. Colloquially, this is known as the "heroes and holidays" or "food and festivals" approach to multicultural education, whereby students learn about Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks during Black History Month. This approach "reinforces the notion, already held by many students, that ethnic minorities are not integral parts of mainstream U.S. society" (Banks, 2009, para. 8). The second approach is the **Additive Approach**, which, while an improvement over the Contributions Approach, is still problematic because it introduces isolated lessons or units on specific cultural groups without true integration into the curriculum. This might resemble a social studies unit on Native American reservations, a biology unit on African American scientists, or a literature unit on Asian American writers.

Teachers in urban schools should consistently strive for the top two approaches on the tier of multicultural education. In the **Transformation Approach**, diverse figures and topics become fundamental to and unified with the established curriculum. Instead of cursory mentions or supplemental units, “the center of the curriculum no longer focuses on mainstream and dominant groups, but on an event, issue, or concept that is viewed from many different perspectives and points of view” (Banks, 2009, para. 10). For example, an elementary teacher may structure her entire year’s curriculum around the theme of identity and examine multiple and intersecting identities in all subjects from many perspectives.

Finally, the **Social Action Approach**, at the top of the multicultural pyramid, is the most difficult to adopt, especially given urban schools’ bureaucratic constraints. At this level, students “acquire the knowledge and commitments needed to make reflective decisions and to take personal, social, and civic action to promote democracy and democratic living” (Banks, 2009, para. 11). Thus, students do not merely consume their multicultural knowledge, but seek to use it in ways that better their school, family, and community. Banks offers some suggestions for ways that students can participate in social activist multicultural education, no matter their age:

Mak[e] a commitment to stop laughing at ethnic jokes that sting. . . . Read books about other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. . . . Make friends with students who are members of other racial and ethnic groups and participate in cross-racial activities and projects with students who attend a different school in the city. . . . Participate in projects that provide help and comfort to people in the community with special needs. . . . Participate in local political activities such as school board elections and elections on local initiatives. (para. 12)

When teachers ascribe to the tenets of CRP and seek to include transformative and social activist multicultural education in their classrooms, urban students are more likely to experience success in school and in life. We believe that urban educators are fully capable of being culturally responsive, no matter their own race or background, as long as they are committed to challenging their previously held notions, dedicated to constant reflection and renewal, and willing to involve their students in classroom life and curricular planning. The next section, on research on CRP, demonstrates other ways that teachers can use this pedagogy.

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS ABOUT CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PEDAGOGY

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Because of its recent prevalence in critical and progressive education literature and practice, there are numerous research studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of CRP. Findings from research include the following (Gay, 2000; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Lee, 1998; Ware, 2006; Young, 2010):

- Teachers are perceived as more effective when they implement principles of CRP.
- CRP creates a collaborative, equitable classroom community.
- Culturally responsive classrooms and teachers improve student achievement.
- CRP is most meaningful when combined with teacher reflection.

Four studies are included in Table 3.2 to illustrate the ways that researchers examine cultural responsiveness in practice. Lee (1998), as a teacher researcher, investigated a new curriculum and assessment structure designed to draw on students' funds of knowledge by addressing important community problems through performance-based assessments and technology. (See Chapter 1 for more information on funds on knowledge and Chapter 5 for more information on teachers as researchers.) She argues that such assessments involve higher cognitive abilities and also make cultural sense. Roberts (2010) studied eight successful African American teachers in the Southeastern United States and uncovered the ways they cared for their students. She suggests a theory of "culturally relevant critical teacher care" that improved student achievement and teacher-student relationships. Ware (2006) examined one component of CRP: warm demanders. This type of teaching, often associated with African American teachers of African American students, involves teachers who cares for their students and continuously hold high expectations for students' achievement. Ware found that teachers who viewed themselves through this warm demander lens implemented culturally responsive practices and increased student achievement. Finally, Young (2010) engaged in coparticipatory action research, forming a reflective group with teachers and administrators to discuss the translation of CRP from theory to practice. (See Chapter 5 for more information on participatory action research.) Findings show that teachers must be always vigilant and aware of

their cultural biases and work as a collective group to ensure that CRP is translated from theory to practice.

**Table 3.2** Research Studies on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Author(s)	Purpose	Findings	Implications	URL
Lee (1998)	The researcher worked with faculty at an inner-city high school to implement culturally relevant performance-based assessments (PBAs).	Culturally relevant PBAs make sense both cognitively and culturally, as they improve higher-level thinking skills and encourage students' connections to their home cultures and communities.	Teachers can design culturally relevant PBAs when they link assessment to curriculum and instruction, draw on students' and their communities' funds of knowledge, address a community or political need, and involve collaboration. Lee was a teacher and researcher in the program, thus illustrating that teachers can research their own students and use their findings to improve practice.	
Roberts (2010)	The researcher conducted a case study of eight successful African American teachers and examined how their definitions of care intersected with culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory (CRT).	Teachers demonstrated "culturally relevant critical teacher care," which the researcher defined as a blend of traditional care, critical race consciousness, and historical notions of African American education pre- and post- <i>Brown</i> .	When working with Black students in urban schools, successful teachers should make attempts to combine important theories (CRP, CRT, and care) in a way that best serves their students and their students' needs. Teachers can learn from the pedagogy of teachers in pre- <i>Brown</i> segregated schools.	

Author(s)	Purpose	Findings	Implications	URL
Ware (2006)	The researcher interviewed and observed two African American teachers and analyzed how these teachers described their instructional practices and beliefs and how their backgrounds informed their practice.	Teachers embodied the “warm demander” role in which students believed they did not lower their standards but were still willing to help students achieve. This pedagogy, when combined with CRP, leads to increased student achievement.	Teachers who view themselves as warm demanders, caregivers, and pedagogues can increase achievement, so teachers should consciously embody these different aspects of practice to encourage students.	<a href="http://uex.sagepub.com/content/41/4/427.full.pdf+html">http://uex.sagepub.com/content/41/4/427.full.pdf+html</a>
Young (2010)	Using an inquiry approach and participatory action research, researchers examined how teachers and administrators conceptualized CRP, what efforts were required to actualize CRP, and what challenges arose for both groups.	Teachers and administrators often defined CRP in different ways and continued to allow their own personal biases to inform their implementation of CRP. Teachers found it difficult, given the current political climate, to translate CRP theory into practice.	Teachers need to continually and critically examine their own cultural biases in order to address education’s systemic racism. This can be done through peer dialogue, which includes coparticipatory discussion of not just what theories to use in the classroom, but how to implement them in practice.	<a href="http://jte.sagepub.com/content/61/3/248.full.pdf+html">http://jte.sagepub.com/content/61/3/248.full.pdf+html</a>

**PRACTICE**

In this section, practicing urban teachers **Andrea Eifrid Avery** and **Beth Sullivan** describe cultural responsiveness in their classrooms and explain how adopting CRP has improved their teaching and helped create equitable classroom communities. Andrea is a secondary social studies teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, and Beth is a secondary special education teacher in New York City. Their firsthand accounts illuminate the theory and research reviewed earlier in this chapter.

Andrea and Beth acknowledge that the first step in adopting a culturally responsive stance is to think about what culture means, as teachers and as cultural beings themselves. This includes reflecting on one's own background. Reflecting on her educational history and how her schooling was influenced by culture allowed Andrea to make decisions about how she would teach students of all cultures on her own classroom.

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*Andrea:* I attended public school in Atlanta near Emory University and the Centers for Disease Control. Although my school was always ethnically diverse, it was overwhelmingly middle to upper class. From kindergarten to 12th grade, I watched my schools become "less White." Much of this change was caused by a demographic change in my county and redistricting. By the time I graduated, I had been exposed to greater diversity in my student body. I am extremely grateful that I was educated in a diverse school system. We had international field days and were always asked to research other nations. I feel my school celebrated international diversity, but like many schools, it was usually on the surface level, ignoring deeper interpretations of history and culture. Somehow my schools placed even less emphasis on celebrating local cultures, such as the large Black population in our county. The majority of my teachers were White baby boomers, who were most likely out of touch with the younger Black culture. I now teach at the same school where I attended high school. From what I have experienced during my teaching career here, the teachers now are younger, more diverse, and have a better grasp on the culture of today's students.

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Beth also finds herself thinking about her own cultural education when determining what and how to teach. She works in a school for special education students, where she teaches secondary English and social studies in a self-contained classroom. Here, she discusses the way she conceptualizes her background's influence on her teaching style.

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*Beth:* I am making a concerted effort at becoming more aware of how my own culture and values affect and influence my teaching. I currently have the luxury of developing and implementing my own curricula, which frequently leaves me asking myself, "Why do I think this is important to teach them? Am I teaching them this because I was taught it? Am I teaching this because I think I am supposed to or because I believe it to be important for them to learn?" I have found myself struggling with the decision to teach the

"classics" versus contemporary authors. While teaching Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, I began most classes with a five-minute writing prompt directly relating to a theme or idea from that day's reading. The students thoroughly enjoyed talking about their own experiences. Therefore, with the appropriate questioning, a 400-year-old play written by a European became relevant to my modern day New York City teenagers through discussions of love, revenge, murder, parent-child relationships, and friendship.

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Andrea and Beth are both passionate about and committed to connecting their students' lives outside the classroom to the world of academic learning. Andrea sees being culturally responsive as learning to speak the "language" of her students.

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*Andrea:* Culture can many times double as language. If you want to communicate with someone, you must speak his or her language. Assuming you and most of your students speak English but do not share similar cultures, you have to use the students' culture to reinforce your message. Otherwise they may not understand or retain the lesson. Outside of school hours, urban students are immersed in a culture that may be very different than yours, and over time they "learn to learn" within the confines of that culture. If you are not using that culture in your own classroom, you are missing out on an opportunity to really engage students so they can truly comprehend and *love* what you are trying to teach them.

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The question remains, then, how to turn the theory of cultural responsiveness into practice. Andrea and Beth provide detailed examples of lessons they use with diverse groups of students. It is important to note that Beth's lessons, while designed for a special education population, are no less culturally responsive and certainly no less rigorous than Andrea's lessons, designed for a general social studies classroom. Both teachers demonstrate that connecting to students' cultures is not only necessary but also *possible*, no matter what their academic level, and that this connection improves student learning for all.

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*Andrea:* I wrote a lesson for my American Civil War unit keeping in mind my diverse students and what motivates them. Over the years, I have learned to incorporate a few elements, such as music, art, and competition, into my lessons as much as possible to reach students of all backgrounds. This



particular project had a list of 15 Civil War people, battles, and events. The students paired up and chose the type of project they wanted to do on a first-come basis. At least three of the project ideas asked the students to compose a song about their topic. One topic in particular, the Battle of Antietam, called for a rap song. Every year I am amazed at the hard work and talent demonstrated. Antietam was the bloodiest battle of the war, and many times this idea resonates with the students because they are exposed to so much violence in their music and video games and—for some—in real life. Most of the time the students come up with several verses and bring in their own beat. It's awesome, and I guarantee you they will never forget Antietam (or anything else they write a song about)!

At least three of the project ideas asked the students to draw a cartoon or illustration. For example, drawing a cartoon about Sherman's Battle of Atlanta or the Anaconda Plan is great for young artists. I have so many great drawings that I have run out of room on my classroom walls. Having a checklist has helped keep my students from getting fixated on one idea. Also, my students love to win, especially when prizes are involved. For the Civil War projects, the students rated each project (excluding their own), and we held a silent vote for the top two projects.

A second example of a culturally responsive lesson is the map relay I created. Movement is very prevalent in African American culture, so I try to incorporate kinesthetic activity into many of my lessons. However, active lessons work for all teenagers, so it can be useful no matter where or who you teach. Do you have a map or diagram that needs to be labeled? The 50 states? The bones in the body? The layers of the atmosphere? For example, when I needed the students to label the 50 states, I divided the class into small groups and taped blank maps around the classroom. I gave each group five minutes to refresh before the game began, and then I lined the teams up in front of a map with only one pen or marker per group. When I said "Go," each team member had to run to the map, label only one state, and then pass the pen to the next member. They rotated their lines for two minutes, and then whichever team had the most states correct was the winner. In addition to being active and fun, you have given the students other reasons to care. They want to do well for each other. Plus, every student will study the map before the test, which is more than I could claim before the game, right?

*Beth:* The underlying current of my modern World Cultures senior-level class rests on two concepts: cultural diffusion and globalization. If the students cannot see how the lives of individuals from around the world can impact their own lives, then the lasting effect of a course is easily lost. For example,

with a unit on African cultures, my students utilized New York City to help make the connections between their own lives and the lives of millions living in the diverse continent of Africa. (I am certain they now know Africa is not a country.) We went to an African roots dance performance and a Ghanaian restaurant to eat fufu. We analyzed the structure, purpose, and significance of traditional African folktales.

After reading African folktales, I then guided the students in writing their own. They had to creatively explain something about their own lives in the form of a folktale. A couple that students came up with were "My folktale explains why there are rats in the projects" and "My folktale explains why there are cockroaches in my apartment in Harlem." They used their own environments to generate a folktale as it was my hope that they would benefit from gaining a glimpse into the creative process of using stories to answer questions about the world around them. The length and quality of each student's writing grew, and the application of daily lessons to rough drafts showed a genuine desire to strengthen and write meaningful folktales. Draft after draft, the students listened to their peers' feedback and read notes from teacher conferences to improve the quality of their writing and the power of their voice. Some even chose to read their original folktales at our schoolwide "celebration of learning" months later. There was ownership and pride in their work, and equally as important, there was a successful marriage of their New York City lives to traditional African storytelling.

In another social studies class, I have written my curriculum for our study of ancient civilizations with the essential question "What does this have to do with my life?" hanging on the wall. My efforts to connect the students' lives to history were affirmed when a mother emailed, "I wanted to thank you for helping [my son] learn about his own and human history in such a thoughtful, interesting, and exciting manner. I am so thrilled he now can thoughtfully think about how cultures can be similar and different." In order to assess their knowledge and help them make connections to the nomadic lifestyle, I routinely posed the question, "Who cares?" I wanted to humanize the stories we were reading about in history, from the development of agriculture to the development of writing, and in order to do this, the students needed to believe these transformations really happened to real people. For example, after reading the legend of Romulus and Remus, my students wrote legends about themselves. They learned about ancient Rome in history and the components of a legend in English, and then made their own decision as to whether they believed the legend of Romulus and Remus really happened.

I believe doing projects like these improves student learning because they combine important process skills in writing, for example, with the content knowledge in history. Over time the repetitive nature of learning about history and seeing how it impacts the modern world—their world—made it easier for my students to automatically make meaningful connections in their work and to classroom discussions. In general, students are able to connect to the content when they recognize that humans, no matter the time period or civilization, use tools, engage in a form of religion, improve efficiency of lives through inventions, produce influential people, and ultimately share a common prehistory.

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In each of the lessons described above, Andrea and Beth reveal that they have high expectations for students of all cultures, abilities, and backgrounds. Beth feels it is important not only to hold high expectations as an individual teacher, but also to communicate these expectations to students and families and to encourage a culture of high standards in urban schools.

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*Beth:* Uncompromised, high, and realistic expectations for all students are the first step toward changing each student's perception of his or her own potential. As one of my seniors wrote me, "This year I found out who I really am." Students of all backgrounds, from all kinds of families and homes, and with varying appreciations for their own history and identity, will fill the seats, whether it's a desk in a Boston public school, a home for incarcerated male teenagers, or a lunch table in Spanish Harlem. For example, on my first day working in a youth prison, one of my male students said, "So you know, Miss, we're not bad people. We just did bad things." I didn't want to know what these teenagers had done to end up in prison; instead I wanted to know where I could take them. Never did I compromise my expectations, and I do believe this attitude is contagious. When one teacher watches another teacher push a student a little further each day, a chain reaction begins. The teachers collectively start to believe, the parents believe, and if you're lucky, the student will then begin to believe he can do more than he has let himself in the past. It's not easy, but when you can help redefine a student's expectation of himself, then the hardest part is over. I have not always been successful at this, but I try. I believe this development of a positive self-image and self-worth needs to start at a young age. Students who continuously struggle both in and outside of the classroom from an early age can begin to develop concrete ideas of their potential, which are harder to mold the older they get.

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Expecting the most from urban students is a key component of CRP. These expectations, however, cannot be divorced from the realities of society in which oppression may continuously work against urban students' struggles for achievement. Andrea and Beth discuss how they challenge the myth of meritocracy in their classrooms and do not shy away from discussing issues of power and privilege.

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*Andrea:* A colleague suggested I read and analyze Dr. Seuss books with my high school students to help them understand complex social dynamics. One book in particular, *The Sneetches*, discusses power and privilege and, though originally written as an allegory of the Holocaust, can be applied to any situation where people are oppressed. In this book, the Sneetches with stars on their bellies are oppressing those without the stars. I ask my students to provide examples of people they know of now or in history that would be "star-bellied Sneetches" and "starless Sneetches." It is easy for them to provide answers, such as Whites and Blacks, politicians and the masses, or the rich and the poor. Many times students are more aware of power than we realize. It is important to help them identify where power comes from and how it is used. They can also learn that not everyone with power abuses it, and some may gain power with few resources. This discussion helps the students understand that they may possess more "power tools" than they realize.

*Beth:* Race, power, and privilege are part of students' daily experiences, from the subway train to school to the conversations at track practice. Providing the students with an opportunity to explore these issues in the classroom helps them develop a full sense of their meanings and historical contexts. In my classroom, we began discussing power and privilege in the historical context of the European colonization of Africa and apartheid. This introduced the topics of race and privilege in a less personalized, less threatening, slightly abstract way. To complement the social studies curriculum, in my English class I had the students read short stories about apartheid written from a variety of South African perspectives, including Whites and Blacks, Jews and non-Jews. Then, to personalize the unit, I asked the students if they had ever been victims of racism themselves. Every hand went up. The anecdotes mostly from male students followed: "She moved away from me" or "She took her watch and put it in her bag when I sat next to her." The students explained why they felt they had been treated unfairly, and usually it was because they felt they were being judged based on their gender, size, and skin color.

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In addition to equalizing the classroom community and improving student learning, culturally responsive teachers like Andrea and Beth are also able to see positive changes in their own teaching practice, job success, and personal satisfaction. Urban schools and the challenges they present can often cause teachers to burn out or feel unsatisfied, but culturally responsive teachers are able to see each day how they are affecting their students' lives.

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*Andrea:* Trying to understand my students and their culture has greatly improved my teaching practice and reputation at my school. My students tell me that I "really care" about them. As a first-year teacher, I made the mistake of thinking that I should make my students more like me. After all, I was a well-behaved, hardworking student with "manners"—why shouldn't they be like me? My mistake was that I was celebrating myself, not them. I was selfish and probably misconstrued as elitist or out of touch. As a result, I seemed distant to some of my students and had trouble getting through to them. How could students feel comfortable enough to learn in a class where the teacher thinks she is better than them? It's important to be humble and keep our eyes and hearts open. I had to learn the hard way that I am here to help my students become the best versions of themselves, not me.

*Beth:* I can see a positive correlation between my attitude toward the lesson and the students' level of involvement. The more I believe in what I'm teaching, the more the students reach the objectives I have set for them. I believe in what I'm teaching when I feel it will help them either process information more efficiently or understand something new about their own world. Therefore, if I did not acknowledge the cultural backgrounds of my students, including their learning styles, relationships with each other, and attitudes toward school, my lacking sense of purpose would pull the overall quality of my teaching down, and with it would go the students' performance.

I am a young teacher who is still learning the art of teaching. I have learned a lot about myself and the world through teaching my students, who over the years have ranged from eight to twenty years old. I've worked in both public and private schools and facilities, and each time I learn about a new experience had by children in our country. Some have learning disabilities while some are gifted; some come from traditional families while others have been shuffled through foster homes. Whatever the experiences the students bring with them when they walk through the school door, they need to know they are going to be respected. They need to know that their lives are important and that their voices are valued.

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**WRAP UP**

This chapter has shown why and how culturally responsive pedagogy is a necessary component of success in urban classrooms, for both teachers and students. Though some critics argue that CRP, as a component of multicultural education, is essentially taking time away from a focus on the basics and what children really need to know (Hirsh, 1992), the value of CRP cannot be understated. It is not meant to be an “add-on” to the basic curriculum or a celebration of cultural holidays; it is meant to be a complete reworking and critical interpretation of the existing curriculum and pedagogical methods common in urban schools. Culturally responsive teachers set high expectations for all students, utilize high-level teaching strategies for all students, explicate issues of power and privilege in their lessons, incorporate students’ cultures into the curriculum, allow students to cooperate and collaborate with each other, demonstrate that all cultures have value, and commit to year-long multicultural education.

Teachers like Andrea and Beth who utilize CRP in their classrooms are advocates for their students because they know that students learn better when they are cared for, when their voices are valued, and when they are part of an equitable classroom community. They do not ignore the cultures of their students, but instead see these cultures as having intrinsic importance, and they are not afraid to address difficult issues of power, privilege, and oppression in their classroom interactions. Teachers with high expectations who maintain intellectual rigor in their lessons and discussions continue to improve learning for all students. Especially in urban schools where bureaucracy or accountability measures that focus more on test scores than on academic and personal development can seem overwhelming, teachers and students alike can be buoyed by culturally responsive pedagogy that improves teaching and learning.

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**EXTENSION ACTIVITIES****Reflection**

1. A necessary part of establishing cultural responsiveness in your classroom is reflecting on your own education. First, with which culture(s) do you identify? In what ways was your prior education culturally responsive or not? Whose cultures were or were not represented? Did you

realize this at the time, or is it only upon reflection that you realize it? Why is that significant?

2. Consider your future first classroom in an urban school. Based on what you learned in this and other chapters, what will you do to ensure that CRP is evident from your first day? Plan a potential first-day activity for the grade level and subject area of your choice, keeping in mind that it should enable you to get to know your students' backgrounds and cultures while still being academically focused. Share your first-day activity with your peers.

### **Action**

1. Choose one lesson that you have already taught that went *well*. Then choose one lesson that you have already taught that could be *improved*. Write a short analysis of how you did or did not use CRP in each lesson, and focus on how using these strategies and skills in a revised lesson would improve your teaching and your students' learning.
2. Conduct a case study of an individual student in your classroom. Using the characteristics of CRP outlined in this chapter, ask the student how he or she feels his or her prior education has or has not been culturally responsive. (If you are teaching an elementary student, you may need to simplify the language or select specific behaviors/beliefs that are of special interest to you.) Seek out specific examples and stories, and write a brief narrative about how the CRP or lack thereof has influenced your student academically and emotionally.

## **SUGGESTED RESOURCES**

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### **Books**

- Au, W. (Ed.). (2009). *Rethinking multicultural education: Teaching for racial and cultural justice*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools.
- Banks, J. (1994). *Cultural diversity and education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Nieto, S. (1999). *The light in their eyes: Creating multicultural learning communities*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Spring, J. (2006). *The intersection of cultures: Multicultural education in the United States and the global community*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

## Websites

### Rethinking Schools ([www.rethinkingschools.org](http://www.rethinkingschools.org))

A progressive education journal that balances classroom practice with theory and emphasizes problems facing urban schools.

### Teaching for Change ([www.teachingforchange.org](http://www.teachingforchange.org))

Offers publications and professional development related to transforming urban schools into socially just communities.

### Teaching Tolerance ([www.tolerance.org/magazine/archives](http://www.tolerance.org/magazine/archives))

An award-winning magazine dedicated to reducing prejudice and promoting equity.

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## CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

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**Beth Sullivan**, originally from Massachusetts, received her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Boston College and her master's and reading specialist's degrees from Columbia University's Teachers College. She has experience teaching Grades 4–6 in Worcester, Massachusetts, and as a supervisor for graduate students at Teachers College. Currently, Beth is a special education teacher at Cooke Center Academy in New York City, focusing on English and social studies.

**Mei Ou**, who is featured in the opening vignette of this chapter, earned her bachelor's degree in English and music from the University of Georgia and her master's degree in middle grades English and social studies education from Emory University. An accomplished violinist who is also fluent in Cantonese and Mandarin, Mei previously taught second grade and is now a seventh-grade teacher in Lilburn, Georgia.